

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis* (also known as “meningococcus”). A small proportion of infected people can develop a serious form of illness, such as meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or a bloodstream infection (septicemia).

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is more common in infants, children, adolescents and young adults. Other persons at increased risk include household contacts of a person known to have had this disease, people with immune system problems, and people traveling to certain parts of the world where meningococcal meningitis is prevalent.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Neisseria meningitidis bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions. An infected person can spread the bacteria by coughing or sneezing directly into the face of others, kissing a person on the mouth, or sharing cups, water bottles, eating utensils, cigarettes, lipstick, or toothbrushes. A person may transmit the bacteria as long as they are present in the nose or throat, especially during the three days before symptoms begin. The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with the disease has been.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The symptoms depend on where the infection is located. Meningococcal meningitis is characterized by a sudden onset of fever, headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to light, confusion, nausea, and vomiting. In newborns and infants, these symptoms may be absent or difficult to notice. The infant may appear to be slow or inactive, irritable, vomiting or feeding poorly. A less common but more severe form of meningococcal disease is meningococcal septicemia. The symptoms of meningococcal septicemia may include fatigue, vomiting, cold hands and feet, cold chills, severe pain in the muscles, joints, chest or abdomen, rapid breathing, diarrhea, and a dark purple rash.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of infection may appear two to ten days after exposure, commonly three to four days.

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

Laboratory tests on samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid are needed to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease requires immediate treatment with antibiotics. Depending on how serious the infection is, other treatments may also be necessary, such as breathing support, medications to treat low blood pressure, and wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin.

How can meningococcal disease be prevented?

A vaccine is available for the bacteria that cause meningococcal disease. Keeping up to date with recommended vaccinations is the best defense against the disease. Preventive treatment with antibiotics for household members, roommates, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions (saliva or spit) can reduce the risk of infection. Good hygiene can reduce the risk of infection as well, such as hand washing, covering noses and mouths when sneezing or coughing, and not sharing cigarettes, straws, cups, glasses, or eating utensils.

How can I get more information about meningococcal disease?

- If you have concerns about meningococcal disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html>.

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